

A less than fearsome tale



ASK A
SCIENTIST

**Dr John Campbell, of
Christchurch, asked:**

I found this spider in my kitchen sink and I vaguely recall dangerous white tail spiders in Australia. What is it and is it harmful?

**Dr Fiona Cross, an
arachnologist, University of
Canterbury, responded:**

As the weather warms, we start noticing an increased presence of white-tailed spiders around our homes. Some other spiders with white spots will soon appear as well, but their markings are different from those of a white-tailed spider. The easiest way to identify a white-tailed spider is by finding a white or cream-coloured spot on the tip of its abdomen (see photo).

New Zealand has two species of white-tailed spider. Both share that distinctive white spot and were introduced from Australia. *Lampona cylindrata* is found in the South Island and it was first seen in Nelson in 1913. It was even earlier, in 1886, when *Lampona murina* began making itself at home in the North Island. The adults can be large, with *Lampona cylindrata* growing to as big as 20mm. With their size, spooky white spot and eight legs scuttling around, these spiders might look like they belong in a horror movie. Just in time for Halloween!

Although white-tailed spiders have been in New Zealand for more than 100 years, it is only since the 1980s when people started complaining of bites from these spiders. Claims include unusual skin lesions despite never actually seeing (or even feeling) the spider bite



A white-tailed spider.

PHOTO: JOHN CAMPBELL

Ask a question

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them. People might make this assumption because they had recently seen a white-tailed spider, but spiders do not actively seek people out to bite. Also, if a white-tailed spider does bite, it will be noticed; its bite is painful.

There is no scientific evidence that white-tailed spiders are responsible for flesh-eating (necrotising) wounds. In 2003, an Australian study was the first to document spider bites of 130 patients, along with expert identification of the spider being either *Lampona cylindrata* or

Lampona murina. Of these patients, the most common symptoms were pain and a red mark or lesion, but no cases of necrosis. Further research in New Zealand also found no evidence for necrosis, and studies on the venom itself have shown very little potential for white-tailed spider venom to cause necrosis.

Any break in the skin has the potential for infection, and different people react differently to various things, such as bee stings. Yet, it can be easy to point the finger at a spider, even when a spider was not expertly identified, let alone seen or felt. Spider bites can be misdiagnosed even by medical professionals, but there are many explanations for an unusual skin infection, and these should be considered.